

For '69 Cubs, Holtzman no-hitter lingers as memory of what might been

By Paul Ladewski

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This week marks the 40th anniversary of pitcher Ken Holtzman's no-hitter against the Atlanta Braves at Wrigley Field, one of the most bittersweet moments in Cubs history.

The game played on Tuesday, Aug. 19, was one of several magical moments for the Cubs in the first five months of the 1969 season. No one could have predicted that, less than 24 hours after the 3-0 victory, the East Division leaders would begin one of the most celebrated collapses in major league history, a cruel twist of fate that Billy Williams called "one of those baseball mysteries that will never be solved."

"It never will be solved," the Hall of Fame outfielder went to tell the Chicago Baseball Museum. "People mention what happened to me all the time, but I try to forget it."

Several attempts to contact Holtzman were unsuccessful. According to a Cubs spokesperson, the organization has not heard from the 63-year-old St. Louis native since 2007, when he left the country to manage the Petach Tikva Pioneers of the Israel Baseball League. The league ceased operation because of economic reasons after one season.

Conventional wisdom suggested that the Cubs would benefit from the emotion-charged victory in front of 37,514 rabid fans, while the Braves would require days to recover from it if they recovered at all. In fact, the two-hour drama did have an impact on both teams, except that it wasn't the one that had been widely anticipated.

As a result of the victory, the Cubs moved to a season-high 32 games (77-45) above the .500 mark. It was a level that they would equal one more time (84-52) but never surpass the rest of the season. The North Siders went on to win only 15 of their final 40 games, a free-fall that saw them plunge from 7 ½ ahead to seven games behind in the division race.

"Most of the time, something like that puts you in a good frame of mind to gel together and play sound baseball," Williams said. "After a no-hitter, there can be a competition among the pitchers. Each one wants to pitch a game that is just as good. But baseball is a strange game. You don't know what will happen from this day to the next one."

Meanwhile, the defeat served as a wake-up call for the Braves, who immediately went on an extended hot streak that saw them win 27 of their final 38

games. Four seasons after the Braves moved from Milwaukee, they captured their first West Division crown by three games.

The closest call for Holtzman came in the seventh inning, when Braves slugger Hank Aaron led off with a drive to deep left field that set off groans in the packed house.

“Two-two pitch . . . Aaron swings . . . That baby is hit . . . Look out,” Vince Lloyd made the call on the WGN Radio broadcast. “It’s way back there in left-center . . . Billy Williams back to the bleachers . . . Back to the corner . . . He grabs it! Ho-ly mackerel! That ball was ticketed to go into the bleachers, and the wind moved it just away from the bleachers to the farthest corner of the wall out there. And Billy Williams stayed with it, grabbed it up against the vines!”

“It was a tough to hit the ball out of the ballpark, but I knew if anybody did it, he would be a guy like Henry Aaron,” Williams said. “The ball actually was out of the ballpark, but I stayed with it. The only reason that I caught it is because the wind kept pushing it back in and toward the foul line, which gave me 2 ½ more feet to work with out there.”

The near-miss seemed to unnerve Holtzman for several pitches. The left-hander walked the dangerous Rico Carty but settled down to retire Orlando Cepeda and Clete Boyer on fly outs.

In the eighth inning, Holtzman induced Bob Didier and Gil Garrido to ground out. Pinch hitter Tommy Aaron did the same, but not before he broke the right index finger of catcher Bill Heath on a foul tip. In the process, Heath became the answer to this trivia question: Name the only player to catch a no-hitter in his final major league game.

In the ninth inning, Alou popped out and Milan bounced out. In the midst of a 44-home run season, Aaron stood between Holtzman and the fourth no-hitter in modern Cubs history.

“A nervous crowd, an excited crowd here at Wrigley Field on a beautiful afternoon,” Lloyd set the scene. “And Holtzman looking down . . . Looks to be calm . . . Nods his head, steps back . . . Here’s the pitch . . . Fastball . . . He swings . . . A ground ball to Beckert . . . Here’s the throw . . . He is out! No-hitter! A no-hitter for Kenny Holtzman! He did it! A no-hit, no-run ballgame! And the Cubs are swamping Kenny out on that mound! Beckert just fumbled that ball momentarily and then threw! And a lot of this crowd has broken through the cordon of Andy Frain ushers and extra guards, and they are out on the field. There is real pandemonium . . .”

“Beckert didn’t want to mess up. Nobody wanted to mess up,” Williams said. “He was kind of shaky when he went after the ball. He stumbled a little bit. We had a lot of fun with that in the clubhouse after the game.”

The Braves were among most potent offenses in the league – they would rank third in batting average and fifth in runs scored – and Holtzman couldn't have hoped for a better time to face them. The visitors were in the throes of an extended slump in which they had scored 21 runs in their last previous 10 games. In one stretch, they were shut out three times in four games.

Holtzman had started against the Braves at home once before in the 1969 season. On June 1, he was tagged for four runs on nine hits in 4 1/3 innings and didn't receive credit for the 13-4 victory. When he retired the first 10 batters before Garrido coaxed a walk in the third inning, there was an early hint that this time would be different.

“In about the sixth inning, we knew the game could be something special,” Williams said. “I could see that, after the catcher gave the sign, Kenny threw the ball right to his glove. He had a good curveball that day. That was the thing with Kenny – if he got get his curveball over the plate, he was difficult to beat.”

In the bottom of the first inning, Santo provided the only runs that Holtzman would need en route to his 14th victory. After Don Kessinger and Beckert greeted Braves ace Phil Niekro with singles, Williams struck out. Then Santo unloaded a three-run homer, his 25th of the season.

Before he was lifted for a pinch hitter, Niekro nearly matched Holtzman pitch for pitch in the next six innings. The Cubs were limited to a pair of hits in that span, a Kessinger single in the fifth inning and Don Young single in the seventh.

In New York seven hours later, Tommy Agee homered to beat the San Francisco Giants in the 14th inning, 1-0, as the eventual division champion Mets moved back to within 7 1/2 games of the division lead.

The following afternoon, Cubs starter Ferguson Jenkins was hit hard in a 6-2 defeat. In the series finale one day later, the Braves prevailed again, 3-1, as unheralded pitcher Jim Britton went the distance on a four-hitter.

The streak reached three losses in a row at Wrigley Field on Friday afternoon, when the Houston Astros parlayed 14 hits, eight walks and two errors into an 8-2 victory. The division lead was reduced to 5 1/2 games, and any notion that the Holtzman no-hitter would be a portent of things to come began to vanish in the warm Chicago air.